

STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE JERRY F. COSTELLO
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION
HEARING ON
AVIATION CONSUMER ISSUES
APRIL 20, 2007

- I want to welcome everyone to our subcommittee hearing on aviation consumer issues. This is a timely topic given the recent string of delayed and cancelled flights, resulting in lengthy tarmac delays and again highlighting customer service issues.

- Voluntary efforts by the industry to improve airline service have come under strong criticism and I believe closer oversight of the aviation industry is needed. While I question a one-size-fits-all legislative approach to regulating consumer issues, changes must be made – and they must be made now.

- As I have said before, if the industry does not take action to address these issues, then Congress will.
- For anyone to gloss over the problems by saying that these instances are few and far between or outside the norm is missing the point -- to force anyone to be stranded on the tarmac for eight, nine, 10 or more hours – just one time is unacceptable!
- This hearing is the first in a series of hearings that this Subcommittee will hold to review aviation consumer issues. If anyone in the industry thinks that if we get by this hearing that it will be business as usual – they are wrong!
- A 2006 audit by the Department of Transportation Inspector General's (DOT IG) office found that only five of the airlines

that had signed on to the voluntary 1999 customer service commitment had internal quality assurance and performance measurement systems in place to meet their promises -- including addressing passengers' essential needs during delays. I do not consider this progress.

- Further, I am disappointed that progress was not made on implementing well-defined contingency plans. This is not a new issue – airlines were aware of the need for contingency plans to deal with extreme weather back in the 1999 when it became part of their Commitments. However, the DOT IG notes that only a few airlines' contingency plans specify in any detail the efforts that will be made to get passengers off the aircraft when delayed for extended periods, either before departure or after arrival. With long, on-board delays on the rise from 2005 to 2006, this should be a priority.

- I was pleased that in response to the December 2006 American Airlines incident and the February 2007 JetBlue incident, the Department of Transportation (DOT) requested the DOT IG to review those situations as well as the airlines' 1999 voluntary commitments so it can consider taking action. I am interested in hearing from both the DOT and the DOT IG on the progress of this report.
- I was also pleased that after JetBlue's February debacle, they took immediate action by creating a customer bill of rights and incorporating those rights into its contract of carriage.
- We must all remember that passengers make an investment when they purchase a ticket – they expect to get to their

destination safely and on-time. There is a cascade effect that a delay or a cancellation has on passengers and their plans.

➤ Like most members of this Subcommittee, I travel by air quite frequently and I see firsthand the frustrations and customer service issues passengers encounter each and every day – from being trapped on the tarmac for hours on end, to lost luggage, to being stranded at a location not of one's choosing; or simply a lack of information regarding reasons for delays or cancellations. Many times, the airlines' answer to a problem is to give passengers an 800 number and simply tell them good luck. That is simply unacceptable.

➤ Communication is key to improving any customer service system. The airlines must make customer service a priority. They must make every effort to: inform passengers of delays

and the cause; provide for passenger's essential needs when delays or cancellations occur; and ensure that passengers are informed of airline policies and the customer's rights before they fly.

- Greater transparency by the airlines also is important.

Airlines must put policies in place and inform their passengers of these policies – it should not be a guessing game or left to the passenger to try to sort it all out.

- With that, again I want to make it clear to everyone that this hearing is the first in a series of hearing on this issue. This Subcommittee intends to closely monitor the actions taken by the airlines and we will hold additional hearings to check on their progress.

➤ Before I recognize Mr. Petri for his opening statement, I ask unanimous consent to allow 2 weeks for all Members to revise and extend their remarks and to permit the submission of additional statements and materials by Members and witnesses. Without objection, so ordered.